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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the provision of quality education for black children in urban public schools. The author argues (1) that urban public schools have failed to provide quality education to black children because education is not conceived in cultural context; (2) that remedial educational programs for minority children have been based on theories of cultural deprivation which imply inferiority of blacks compared to whites; and (3) that these assumptions do not lend themselves to the development of solid educational programs. Theories of black culture that build on African heritage, and efforts to use this to overcome the imposition of the dominant group on the minority culture in Chicago schools, are also reviewed in the paper. The author proposes more black input in the educational system; the politicization of black children to the concept of black socio-political/historical struggle; and the instilling of positive racial identity in black children in order to foster racial pride, self-sufficiency, analytical thinking, and commitment to their people. (Author/AOS)

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TOWARDS A PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL-EDUCATIONAL CONTINUITY

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Urban public schools are failing in their work of providing quality education to Black children. Black children are not taught that they are part of a cultural heritage. Further, they are not taught the basic skills which most agree is a key responsibility of the schools. This major failing in American education is widely recognized. It is usually explained by concepts of cultural deficiency. These explanations are dysfunctional to the development of productive solutions.

In our work at the Center for New Schools we question the pervasive view which seems to have shaped so many remedies and programs for Black education in the recent past. This view is built on the idea that the problem lies with the inadequacies in Black children. While there are different theories of cultural deprivation and social pathology, they all seem to lead to the same conclusions: something is wrong with the children, their parents, and their community.

In my work as Director of the Chicago DTA Region, I have been considering the relationship of these widely held perspectives to the work we have undertaken in order to find new ways to help local schools solve their problems. I have become more convinced that a major part of the problem has been the way the assumptions and perspectives that have been and continue to be used define the problem. This paper is an initial attempt to make the point that cultural deprivation perspectives are both damaging and in-

valid. Further, I propose that the basic perspective for Black children should be the same as it is for white children in schools that are good schools for white children. That is, the school program should be built on the assumption that children have real strengths because they are children and because they are part of a valid culture. Schools should build on the cultural strengths already present in children. This is the theory of cultural continuity. For this theory to be other than superficial we have to consider: continuity to what? Black scholars are looking hard at the issue of the relationship of Afro-Americans to the cultural traditions of Africa and are steadily mounting evidence that there is a basic cultural unity in the African heritage at the level at which we talk about "western" culture or "eastern" culture. I think these ideas are at the base of what educators concerned with the education of Black children must consider. In this paper I briefly discuss the deprivation theories, how we have been working from different perspectives in the Chicago Region, and the support for our position in Black scholarship.

The Pervasive View of Black Educational Problems

In recent years it has been fashionable to build programs to improve the education of Black and other minority group children upon theories of "cultural deprivation." With regard to Black people, theories of cultural deprivation either deny that we have a culture or assert that our culture is inferior to that of white people. This view is so pervasive that it is promoted in such places as a current curriculum guide published by the Chicago Board of Education (1970). Speaking to the problem of "Disadvantaged Afro-Americans," the curriculum guide says:

> As the result of a long history of economic and social deprivation and differential acculturation, the Afro-American child from "disadvantaged" areas tends to exhibit strong feelings of insecurity and behaviors that are often defined as hostile and aggressive. In some instances, these feelings of insecurity cause the child to withdraw and become excessively shy. Because of the discrimination, subtle and overt, and because of the background of disadvantage, the Afro-American child may tend to develop a poor self-image and feel that accomplishment and success are impossible.
>
> In many cases, the black slum child is the product of a strong matriarchal family unit. Frequently there is a lack of a father figure in the home. This results in a family structure headed by the mother or, in many homes, by the grandmother. The absence of the father in the family structure has detrimental effects upon some children, particularly upon some boys; sometimes this lack of a father authority in the home becomes an important factor in developing negative attitudes toward authority figures.

> Limitation of experience during their early years deprives some Negro slum children of the potential benefit of environment. A variety of stimulating experiences developes in children an awareness of the world about them, awakens natural curiosity, and fosters a desire to learn.
>
> A lack of consistency in child-rearing procedures may exist and lead to an unevenness in discipline. Permissiveness is frequently overbalanced by extreme punishment. A lack of consistency in dealing with the child fosters insecurity, but this is not to say that there is not deep love in the family.

It is the process of identifying the problem that is so important. If the explanation for the difficulties in public education of Black students rests on the perspective that the problems are the deprivation of students and their communities, then programs will be designed to enrich, to compensate, and to remove deficiencies. This has indeed been the pattern. We know as educators that these assumptions are not an effective base upon which to develop solid educational programs. We know as Black educators that the assumptions and perspectives of deprivation are not valid and are part of American racism.

Our Approach to the Solution of Urban Educational Problems

Our Chicago-based team of technical assisters within the DTA Project has the task of providing face-to-face technical assistance in order to facilitate problem solving within urban public schools. We do so with the use of knowledge from the DTA documentation of the experience of nine problem solving strategies funded by NIE.

Our purpose is to observe our process of providing technical assistance in order to add to the general understanding of the relationship between research and practice, the capacity of a school to solve its problems, and methods which facilitate the improvement of a school's problem solving capacity.

We do our technical assistance work within District #21 of the Chicago Public School system. The Chicago School System (1974) describes the district in the following way:

> School District #21 serves approximately 18,590 students through its 18 elementary schools and 2 high schools. All of the elementary school students live in the Englewood Community which is on Chicago's south side. The area is approximately 5 square miles in size. The 1970 census figures indicate that a population of approximately 130,000 people live in the Englewood community and 95% of these are Black. Eighteen percent of the children are on welfare. Housing consists largely of old and sub-standard residences.
>
> An indication of the continuing decline of the community is the persistent loss of businesses and as a result the loss of jobs during the last decade.
>
> In 1948 there were 520 stores in Englewood employing 6,441 people. By 1963 the number had dwindled to 307 stores employing 3,482 people. The latest statistics indicate that less than 250 stores are still in business in Englewood. Presently, all of our elementary schools have been designated focus (poverty) schools in need of compensatory education under ESEA guidelines.

Again we see in this description of a community where real people live and seek to build meaningful lives an underlying perspective of deficiency.

Our Preliminary Statement (1976) focuses on the Black educational problem in this way:

> Basic to any approach aimed at improving the quality of education offered in urban schools is the identification of what are perceived to be the origins of the problem. If, as has often been the case, approaches to what constitutes sustained capacity for problem solving are predicated upon fallacious concepts (of the problem's origins), urban youth will continue to achieve at a substandard level.
>
> Approaches based primarily on the myth of Black genetic or cultural inferiority are handicapped at the outset because they concentrate on what educational authorities view as Black "weaknesses" rather than focusing on the cultural strength of the Black community.

It is out of our experience in the Chicago Public Schools that we appreciate the following statement by the historian Lerone Bennett (quoted in Huell, 1976):

> It is scarcely necessary to say that this (education) process is irrelevant to the fundamental needs of Black people. The education system does not corroborate our reality. It does not tell us who we are and how we got there and what we can do about it. In fact, the educational process is not about us at all. The books, pictures, the symbols are about another people who live in another country.

This assertion fundamentally challenges the efforts of the Chicago Region in District #21. On the one hand, we have an educational system institutionalized around the values, methodology and processes which have emerged from the "dominant culture." On the other hand, those to be served by that educational system are substantially and systematically isolated from effective participation. Barbara Huell (1976) in proposing a model for developing programs for Black children states the problem in the following way:

> Black people are engaged in one of the most crucial struggles of our time. It is a struggle for control of the development of our children's minds. As we move tenaciously toward this objective varying attempts are made to assess the current situation and to determine what new education constructs must be developed and how they should be implemented.

It is extremely significant that such a statement has been put forth by a national professional organization BCDI, (Black Child Development Institute), whose purpose is to serve as an advocate for Black children. Careful consideration and analysis of these new conceptualizations and approaches to education for Blacks must be seriously undertaken if educational change is going to be in the interest of Black children.

To develop patterns of problem solving for urban schools that are effective we must overcome the imposition of the dominant upon the minority culture so that programs can be built on the strengths of students and parents served by the schools. Black people must design, implement and control those institutions which control the

minds of Black children; positive concepts of the child's racial identity and self concept must be developed and the child must be politicized to understand the socio-political-historical struggle of Black people throughout the world. The intent is to educate a racially proud, self-sufficient, analytically thinking and academically skilled person committed to Black people.

We believe that we need to re-examine some of the assumptions and models that seem to dominate Western thought regarding culture, where it originated, and how it is transmitted. We propose to base our efforts in this direction on the work of Black scholars who teach us about the strengths in our cultural heritage.

Black Cultural Strengths

It is my position that the prime problems are the underlying dominant assumptions about African culture. We talk about western thought, the American experience, European traditions, the eastern way. Most Americans do not think about Africa in this way. Often people think of "African" as relating to a place, a continent. This is not the case when American, western, European or eastern are used; then people think of tradition and patterns of thought. When people are asked to think about African culture they think about separate tribes and if they have been talking with anthropologists they might see that each tribe has rituals, values, and a language that are worthwhile and viable instances of human social arrangements. Most people do not think about the African heritage

as being an underlying world view rich in history and different from other basic world views. Further, most people think that Afro Americans are culturally separate from Africa and thus we are not part of whatever cultural heritage our African past might give us. I think this may be the explanation of why descriptions of our Black communities in terms of their deficiencies are so damaging. If you were describing a poor Irish community, people would think, yes, they are poor but they are Irish and thereby have something that makes poverty bearable. When a Black community is described the same way, images of disadvantages and deficiencies develop as well as programs to fix them up. We are seen as victims who need help and not as people who are struggling with our present situation just as other people struggle with theirs.

Many Black scholars have been breaking important ground in support of the view that at the level at which we speak of western heritage, there is also an African heritage. Nobles (1974a, 1974b, 1975) and Diop (1974) are two Black scholars who, among others (E.g., Carruthers, 1976; Karanja, 1976; Ladner, 1973; Jachannan, 1972; Mbiti, 1970; Williams, 1974), are contributing to our understanding of the Black cultural heritage. Nobles and Diop contribute to our development of a perspective on Black cultural strengths for the improvement of the education of Black children. It is important to note that Diop's posing a Two Cradle Civilization Theory has recently gained wide international attention among Black scholars.

The first of those cradles is characterized by:

> The abundance of vital resources, its sedentary, agricultural character, the specific conditions of the valley, will engender in man, that is, in the Negro, a gentle, idealistic, peaceful nature, endowed with a spirit of justice and gaiety... By contrast, the ferocity of nature in the Eurasian steppes, the bareness of those regions, the overall circumstances of material conditions, were to create instincts necessary for survival in such an environment. Here, nature left no illusion of kindliness: it was implacable and permitted no negligence; man must obtain his bread by the sweat of his brow. Above all, in the course of a long painful existence, he must learn to rely on himself alone, on his own possibilities. He could not indulge in the luxury of believing in a beneficent God who would shower down abundant means of gaining a livelihood; instead, he would conjure up dieties maleficent and cruel, jealous and spiteful... This is how the environment gradually molded these instincts in the men of that region, the Indo-Europeans in particular. All the people of the area, whether white or yellow, were instinctively to love conquest, because of a desire to escape from those hostile surroundings. The milieu chased them away; they had to leave it or succumb, try to conquer a place in the sun a more clement nature.

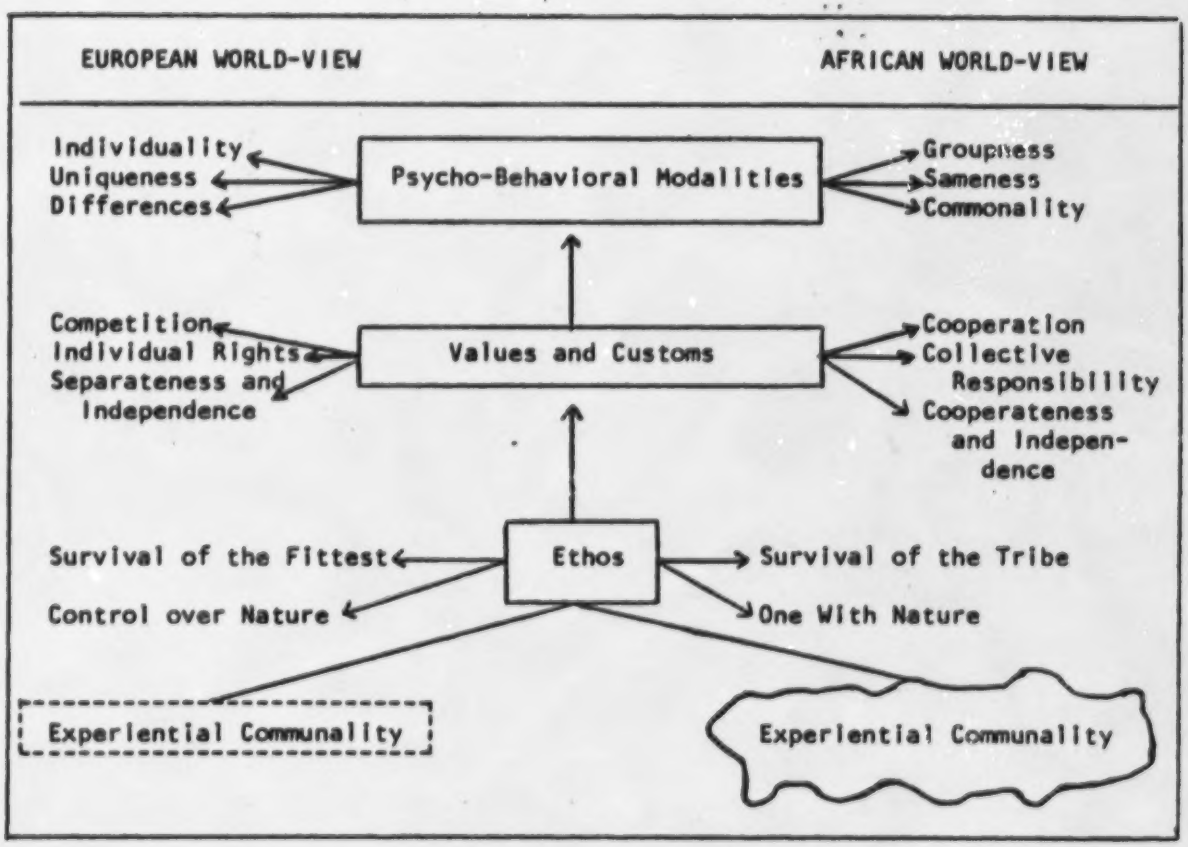
Diop's Theory has critical implications for our attempts to examine the viability of a theory of cultural/educational continuity. It asserts a basic cultural unity among people of African descent all over the world. It substantially challenges the traditional theories of white historians and social scientists who have either assumed or claimed that Blacks in America have been culturally isolated from Africa in a fundamental sense. Evidence of such theories is reflected in the works of Stampp (1956) and Genovese (1965).

Nobles' (1975) work supports this view of the Black heritage as being distinct from the white heritage and of its differential strengths. He states: We recognize that there exists a fundamental case of dissimilarity between Africans and Europeans. We (Blacks) are African people by virtue of our genetic (biological) and cultural (philosophical) ancestral heritage. African-Americans are African people who have been separated from their natural environment and have been incarcerated in European-American conceptions of reality. Based on their comparative cultural analysis, substantial evidence supports the existence of an African World View (Black) as distinguished from a European World View (White). The following schematic diagram designed by Nobles presents a representative view of the literature emerging from Black scholars.

(Comparative World-View Schematic about here)

11.

COMPARATIVE WORLD-VIEW SCHEMATIC



The existence of an African world view suggests a different approach to the problems of Black education in this country. It suggests that programs must be built on the assumption that Black children, like their white counterparts, are part of an important world heritage, which is a different heritage from the dominant traditions within America. Further, this heritage should be examined to develop ideas of specific cultural strengths from which we can build. This approach will provide continuity between the child, his past, and his living heritage which is after all a crucial purpose of education. I have labeled this approach to education as cultural educational continuity.

The Chicago Region has begun to explore the implications of working from this base in its work of developing and implementing strategies that grapple effectively with the day to day problems of education in Black schools in District 21. We know that what we are trying is difficult. We know that we will find approaches that work and others that do not. We know that our basic ideas themselves may be refined in the experience. We know we must deal with the problems of teaching basic skills and of building new and more effective approaches to change at the school level. We remain convinced that we can only do that by dealing with the real issues and not by tinkering on the surface.

The African world view suggests an alternative approach to educational philosophy. Founded upon the emergent theory of educational/cultural continuity, the Chicago Region of DTA hopes to conceptualize, implement and assess new sets of educational strategies which will enable the school/community, District 21 and, we hope, other school districts in the future to develop a model to overcome effectively the impediments and inadequacies of education for urban youth.

Conclusion

In the course of providing educational technical assistance to teachers and others in a predominantly Black urban section of Chicago we have come to realize the human and educational value of framing our work within the perspective of the cultural heritage of the parents and children. In the strengths of the African cultural heritage we find the source for a perspective of cultural-educational continuity to use in strengthening our technical assistance work within public schools which seek to educate Black children. Within this perspective we seek to conceptualize, operationalize, implement and assess new educational strategies or adaptations of other educational strategies. Our strategies will reinforce the heritage of cooperation, collective responsibility, interdependence, survival of the tribe and oneness with nature, to bring into harmony the culture of the Blacks and the educational process to ensure the positive development of urban youth and the validity and

credibility of educational institutions. We begin to accomplish this in our work with peer tutoring, encouraging and assisting in the involvement of parents within the schools, and in our utilization of knowledge from other Black educational experiences.

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